

# A history of the word (and practice of) genealogy



**"Dead people are easy to love. It's the living ones who are hard."** ~ Laurence Overmire  
Image is courtesy of [an article](#) about tracing Irish ancestors and the quote comes from Lawrence Overmire's [official website](#).

As I've written before, I [am a genealogist](#) (formerly employed as one) who has done "research updating genealogy of my mom's family by my grandfather, [using varied resources on the internet and photographs](#)," while mentioning genealogical sources in varying other posts.<sup>1</sup> But there is one question that confounds me: what is the history of the word and practice of genealogy itself?

In his 1967 novel, [Washington D.C.](#), Gore Vidal hilariously makes fun of, on pages 198-199, (as you could put it) the practice of genealogy:

Mr. Carhart was standing at his desk on which had been arranged a series of charts containing thousands of little boxes, some blank and some written in. "Genealogy," he said amiably. "I've traced the Carhart back to Robert the Bruce, in two lines."

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<sup>1</sup> See "[The story of the extra regiment soldiers: from McCay to Patton](#)"; "[Benjamin Murdoch's life after the war](#)"; "[A young man with some property](#)"; the story of a former Maryland captain"; "[A character for probity and honor](#)"; the story of Theodore Middleton"; "[A Gentleman of Maryland](#)"; the short life of Edward Giles"; "[An officer of the Revolution](#)"; The story of Mountjoy Bayly" (In this post I wrote that "the only way to find this out would be to, perhaps, would be to [contact the DC Archives](#). I don't feel it is my place to do this since I would be intruding on genealogy research by the family itself, but it is open for any other researchers"); "[A "person of trust": the story of Archibald Golder](#)"; and "[The post-war life of Alexander Lawson Smith, a "Harford Man"](#)".

“That must be interesting sir.” Peter [said]...Mr. Carhart’s reputation as a bore was not exaggerated. Not only did he...have a series of set numbers...but he could also be spontaneously dull. He was exactly what Peter needed.

“I’m all right, as you can see, through the nineteenth and most of the eighteenth century, a few holes here and there, of course, but the Carhart line is clear. Then in the seventeenth century was have a few little problems.” He frowned: large problems obviously. “There is a connection with Sir Thomas Browne which is quite exciting but depends entirely upon this lady here.” He poked at one of the little boxes. “*Who* was her first husband? And are we kin to her children or to those by the second husband?” ...[Peter then gives Mr. Carhart his magazine] Peter was becoming restive: a sign that he was responding to the Carhart treatment. He was bored to life again.

Of course, I’m taking the context out of this story perhaps too much, but this whole thing does make me chuckle. It is worth noting that Peter and Mr. Carhart were talking in a mansion, and both were white, in the “high life” of the wealthy to say the least. So, you could say that from this that genealogy was a hobby of the rich. I dug into this further, to find out the origins of the word itself.

### **The origin of the word “genealogy.”**

Before moving onto the history of the practice of genealogy, why not delve into the origin of the word itself?

Unfortunately, John Ayto’s *Dictionary of Word Origins* does not have an entry for the word “genealogy” (likely because it was not used as often when the book was published in 1990) but does have one for “family.” It saying that the word has an unknown origin, with the word familia, indicating a term for domestic servants in the household, deriving from the Latin word famulus and only coming to its current meaning when translated into English to mean the “whole household,” then narrowed again to a “group of related people.” However, *The Oxford Dictionary of Word Histories* solves this problem by giving the origins of the word “genealogy” on page 229:

**genealogy** [Middle English] This came via Old French and late Latin from Greek *genelogia*, from *genea* ‘race, generation’ and *-logia* ‘speaking, discourse.’

The [Online Etymology Dictionary](#), of course, has an entry as well, which is similar to the one on the *Oxford Dictionary*, along with other entries for the related words “[genealogist](#)” and “[genealogical](#)”:

early 14c., “line of descent, pedigree, descent,” from Old French genealogie (12c.), from Late Latin genealogia “tracing of a family,” from Greek genealogia “the making of a pedigree,” from genea “generation, descent” (from PIE root [\\*gene-](#) “give birth, beget,” with derivatives referring to procreation and familial and tribal groups) + -logia (see [-logy](#)). An Old English word for it was folctalu, literally “folk tale.” Meaning “study of family trees” is from 1768.

Encyclopedia Britannica [also talks](#) about the origin of the word “genealogy”, calling it the “study of family origins and history.” Further books, such as *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, say that genealogy is one of the two ways of classifying language, being the same as “genetic” in this context.<sup>2</sup>

### **How should we define genealogy?**

First, before telling the history of the practice, we should define what genealogy even is! Otherwise, telling a history would be pointless.

The *Webster’s New World College Dictionary* defines genealogy as simply “a chart or recorded history of a person or family from an ancestor or ancestors” or as “the science or study of family descent” and as “descent from an ancestor; pedigree; lineage.”

Beyond that broad definition, there are many others out there. Some seem to differentiate between “family history” and “genealogy” (especially [depending](#) on whether you live in North America or Europe) while others say that genealogy is “[history in a microcosm](#).”<sup>3</sup> In terms of the word “genealogy” itself, some enthusiastically say it is a “[hunt to answer](#) every question you have ever had about your family and family history” while others say it is “[essentially](#) the study of information” or your “[own personal history mystery](#).” Others, like [a site](#) on Italian genealogy,

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<sup>2</sup> The *QPB Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins* by Robert Hendrickson also has no entry for the word “genealogy” which should be no surprise.

<sup>3</sup> The Society of Genealogists [makes this distinction](#), defining genealogy as “establishment of a Pedigree by extracting evidence, from valid sources, of how one generation is connected to the next. (In essence, this means the discipline of the construction of a valid family tree)” and family history as “a biographical study of a genealogically proven family and of the community and country in which they lived. (In essence, this means the writing of a biography of a series of related ancestors of common genealogy. Family History incorporates Genealogy).” By these definitions, I have engaged in genealogy and family history!

note that “often it is important to know where we come from, for a fuller sense of direction in life, in participating to a larger general design.”

Furthermore, the following sites define genealogy either "a record or account of the ancestry and descent of a person, family, group" or "the study of family ancestries and histories" or "descent from an original form or progenitor; lineage; ancestry" in the case of [Dictionary.com](#), "an account of the descent of a person, family, or group from an ancestor or from older forms" or "regular descent of a person, family, or group of organisms from a progenitor...or older form [pedigree]" or "the study of family ancestral line" or an "account of the origin and historical development of something" in the case of [merriam-webster.com](#). In addition, [wikitionary](#) calls it "the descent of a person, family, or group from an ancestor or ancestors; lineage or pedigree" or "A record or table of such descent; a family tree" and "the study, and formal recording of such descents" while [Collins Dictionary](#) defines it as the "study of the history of families, especially through studying historical documents to discover the relationships between particular people and their families." In addition, [Cambridge Dictionary](#) calls it "the study of the history of the past and present members of a family, or a particular history of this type".

Using these definitions, many of the posts on this blog would fundamentally be genealogical in nature, especially the ones about the members of the Maryland Extraordinary (Extra) Regiment.

### **The practice of genealogy**

As it stands now, the public, [at least in the United States](#) (and in other countries like [those in Europe](#) and across [Asia](#)), seems deeply interested in genealogy. This has been reflected by the Mormons, who are big into the subject [by running](#) familysearch.org and its affiliated Family History Library. Even the Boy Scouts of America has [a genealogy merit badge](#) (I don't remember that from the time I was in Scouts)! Additionally, the Internet Archive has [genealogical works](#), and the Library of Congress [has certain collections](#).

A [search on Google Books](#) pulls up a lot of old genealogical publications. Avoiding specific family histories, or genealogies, I focused on genealogical publications.

For a magazine titled *Genealogy: A Journal of American Ancestry*, [published in 1912](#), is an index to volumes 1 and 2, and then focus on specific families, certain records are transcribed (1790 census), and then there are columns for the publication on genealogical questions. These

columns interestingly do not indicate gender of those writing in, but only their inquiries and surnames, with mentions of where the responses are located, on what page I presume.

The final page noted that it only cost \$5.00 a year for a subscription to the *Genealogy* magazine, which was published by William M. Clemons on 45 and 49 William St in New York City, and edited by Lyman H. Weeks. Advertisements for family history information were also offered as was a list of nearby genealogists, and notation of the magazine having its own archive of genealogical materials. I could go through over 300 other pages in the Google Books, but perhaps it is better to focus on the publisher, editor, and genealogists mentioned in their “directory,” just in the first issue of this magazine.

Mr. Clemens, whose full name was William Montgomery Clemons, lived from 1860 to 1931, and published at least [26 works](#), various magazines and [family records](#), along with [books](#) on Mark Twain, to name [a few](#). The Genealogy Bank has an article about him and his life. They [write](#) that

William Montgomery Clemens (1860-1931) was a prolific genealogist and writer.

Nephew to the more famous Samuel Clemens [or Mark Twain] (1835-1910) – he was also a newspaper man and author...A prolific writer, he was the author of well over 100 books and hundreds of essays and newspaper articles. His regular column – “*Notes on American Ancestry and Revolutionary Records*” regularly appeared as the “*Genealogical Department*” in the Columbia, SC newspaper – the *State*...Over 80 of Clemens’ genealogy columns appeared in *the Star*. Each one has genealogical details & information for families from across the country. He regularly received questions from his readers and posted them to this column.

What about the editor, Lyman Horace Weeks, and recommended genealogists H. Wattel and E. Haviland Hillman? Lyman Horace Weeks was also a prolific genealogical writer as [this page](#) shows, only appearing [one time](#) in *Harper’s Magazine* apparently. The New York Public Library [describes](#) him as such:

Lyman Horace Weeks (1851-1942) was an American genealogist, historian and editor. His specialty was genealogical research and he wrote and edited monographs and serials. His biography of Sir Peter Warren, British naval officer who aided in the capture of Louisbourg in 1745, was based on genealogical research.

Nothing else is known about him from my internet searching. For H. Wattel, it seems an insurmountable task to find his first name. As for E. Haviland Hillman, he seems to have been based on London for [some amount of time](#), part of the F.S.G., writings some books (see [here](#) and [here](#)). From a quick search, the term “F.S.G.” seems to be an accreditation of [some sort](#). Further verification proves this to be correct. The denotation refers to one as a Fellow of the Society of Genealogists (SoG), based in London, [founded in 1911](#). The organization [describes](#) what this means:

[As a fellow] they enjoy the knowledge their services have been recognised by their peers. They are entitled to use the initials FSG (Fellow of the Society of Genealogists) after their name and mention it on any professional websites they have. They are not compelled to do anything else. Fellowship is given for work and contributions already made to Genealogy; not for future work.

Likely when Hillman was a genealogist he was held to the same standard. SoG in 1911 was [apparently founded](#) as "a place where professional genealogists and amateur enthusiasts could meet." But who were those genealogists and enthusiasts? Considering that it was only 50 people at its founding in 1911 and still less than 1,000 after WWII, as noted [by the UK's National Archives](#), it is probably worth an educated guess that the group was exclusive, attracting those who were well-off, respectable, male, and white. While it has become "[Britain's premier family history society](#)," it seems to be still exclusive to an extent. It has a "registered office located in Greater London," as noted on [a business site](#), at the building, as it looked in 2015. The building is small and almost looks like a library, [at least inside](#). I was expecting something more ornate, but I was wrong.

What about 45 and 49 William St in New York City? As it stands now, it is [a huge apartment building](#) with construction on the street level. As it turns out, this location is just one of the many places rented out within the “Trump Building” (because Trump is the landlord of it) which was [constructed in 1930](#). However, this magazine came out in 1912, 18 years before the tower was constructed. So where were their offices? While a photo of William Street before 1930 cannot be found, the city was teeming with cars and many skyscrapers [even by the 1920s](#). It is likely that the building they were in was invoked a relatively recent style, as noted in an article [by the New York Times](#):

By the beginning of the 20th century, the first generation of downtown skyscrapers ground out any remaining vestiges of the Dutch city, and in 1901 The New York Times mused that the crooked streets “remain to this day to bewilder modern New Yorkers”...Amos F. Eno, whose family had owned property in the area since before the Civil War, gave South William a renewed Dutch twist in 1903...Gilbert chose brick the color of honey and trimmed his commission with the soft white terra cotta that frames bays of leaded windows, rising to a stepped gable bearing a small circular window.

Then we get to *The American Genealogical Record*, published by a company in San Francisco. It told the history of specific families, just like *Genealogy* magazine, and seemed to resemble genealogy books we still see today. Sadly, this book does not give [any insight](#) into genealogy at that time.

### **Concluding words**

There is still something to say after all this. The practice of genealogy has changed over the years. Originally it was a hobby conducted by an exclusive few who were undoubtedly well-off white men (and perhaps some women). As the years went by, it became more inclusive and more scholarly. Genealogy is a field open for those of all races, sizes, and shapes. It allows one to cross class, racial, gender, or other lines which is, at times, harder in other disciplines. This is, what you could say, makes it unique. With all sorts of genealogical information online, one can sit at their computer and look up this and that, but this only gets so far because not every record is digitized. So, you still must go to cemeteries, archives, libraries, historical societies, and the like. You can't look up everything online. To end this post, I look forward to your comments and the future trajectory of *History Hermann*, fully moving into the field of genealogy!